

SITES to see

Made just for you

Great Web sites for creating your own dresses, bags, cookbooks, and all kinds of custom-made goodies

You fall in love with a dress or a bag, but it comes only in shocking pink. It's a bummer when you find what you're looking for, but it's not exactly right. Well, maybe you're shopping in the wrong places. Lots of sites now let you custom-design your own clothing, housewares, accessories, and products. You pick the colors, shapes, patterns, or sizes. Some sites even let you add a picture of your new puppy.

We combed through dozens of these sites to find the best ones, which are listed here and on the

following pages. First, we had our experts at Consumer Reports WebWatch, an Internet watchdog group, screen them. All the sites comply with our guidelines for customer service, privacy, and

disclosure of contact info. They also have a good track record with consumers.

We eliminated sites that just let you add initials or tailor clothing to your size or were overpriced. Ecreamery.com, which sells

custom-blended ice creams, sounded cool until we found it charged at least \$50 for a half-gallon. The small messenger bag we ordered from Timbuk2.com cost us \$114.

We left out other sites because the products we ordered were a letdown, like the untasty sports bars from YouBars. Others weren't user-friendly. SmithandNoble.com,

which among other things sells pillows you can customize in hundreds of fabrics, offered no way to see the final product you designed before ordering it. But the sites that worked were fun to use, and we were thrilled with most of our made-to-order goodies.

Tip
Some custom-made products are returnable but many aren't. So check return policies before you place your order.

Bags 1154Lill.com

This site is great if you have an eye for design but no sewing ability or interest. It offers 31 styles ranging from \$26 to \$200. Start by choosing a hobo, tote, or clutch and then pick a fabric for the exterior, straps, interior, and in some cases details like a stripe or pocket. The bag we ordered was well made in a hefty fabric, but our tester told us that the black print might bleed if you get it wet. (Other sites we found with cute, custom bags were Freddyandma.com and Elementalthreads.com.)

TIP To get ideas, see samples of what's for sale. Also, look under "design" for tips.

Shipping Standard is \$9; allow three to four weeks.

Return policy No returns.

Shown: Donna bag, \$188, plus tax and shipping.





Recipe books Tastebook.com

This site makes it easy to create a gorgeous hardcover cookbook (\$19.95 to \$34.95) with your own recipes and photos. You can also add recipes from partner sites like Epicurious.com and Foodnetwork.com. You can select the cover image and type in the title and byline. It takes some work to gather the recipes, but we were really impressed with the professional look and reasonable price of our Tastebook.

TIP Don't miss the instructional video.

Shipping Standard is \$7.95; allow five to seven days.

Return policy You can return a book for a full refund within 30 days.

Shown: cookbook for \$19.95, plus shipping.

Sneakers Nikeid.nike.com

Have Shox, Dunks, and other popular Nike models (\$70 to \$170) personalized here. In most cases, you can choose the colors for the lining, lace, heel, and "swoosh." We loved the 3D image of the shoe as we created it. One bummer: The materials on the running sneakers we ordered looked flimsy

compared with other Nikes we've tested. (Other custom-sneaker sites worth checking out are Mykswiss.com, Vans.com, Converse.com, and Rbkcustom.com.)

Shipping Standard is \$12; allow four weeks.

Return policy Returns within 30 days. After that, you can get refunds only for shoes that haven't been worn.

Shown: Nike Shox Go iD women's running shoe, \$110, plus shipping and taxes.



SHOPPING TIPS

1 Request samples when possible. Some sites offer them free so you can check colors, textures, and patterns before ordering; request them by phone or e-mail.

2 View finished products. To help you choose colors and styles, some sites have a section with examples of finished products. Nikeid.nike.com has a "start with an inspiration to customize" link when you click on a sneaker and Lightdesign.net has a "gallery" link.

3 Buy gift certificates. Most of these sites offer gift certificates, so you can send a customized gift. The recipient can enjoy customizing the product herself.

4 Check the big customization sites. For all kinds of gifts that can be customized with a personal message, photo, monogram, or even your own artwork, try Personalizationmall.com, Gifts.com, Cafepress.com, and Thingsremembered.com.

5 Use only the highest-quality photos. If you submit a phone-camera picture, you might be disappointed with the results.

6 Give it time. If you need a product by a specific date, keep in mind that it might take three to four weeks to receive certain items, such as silhouette artwork or Nike sneakers. Our orders generally came within the time frame noted on the site.

Candy Mymms.com

M&Ms printed with personalized messages or faces make cool party favors. Upload digital photos to the site. You can also pick the font and the packaging or additional gifts like a candy dispenser. The minimum order is \$44.97 for three 7-ounce bags.

TIP Click on the "New! Faces on M&Ms" link rather than on "Custom Printing" so you can get the order form that includes all your customization options. We loved our pink M&Ms with a pic of a staffer's daughter.

Shipping Standard starts at \$13.95 for orders up to \$50; allow 10 days.

Return policy In general, this site doesn't accept returns.

Shown: Pieces from three 7-ounce bags we ordered for \$44.97 plus shipping.



Dresses Dressbydesign.com

We had a blast designing our own dress at this site. If you choose the custom-sewn options (\$199 to \$299), you can pick one of six styles. Then you choose the neckline, sleeve length, skirt length, and fabric. (A similar site we liked but didn't order from is Studio28couture.com.) One complaint: The dress we ordered was too big, even though we chose the mix-and-match sizing, which lets you request separate measurements for the bust, waist, and hips. But it fit fine after we sent it back for free alterations. So we recommend choosing standard sizing. Both sizing options come with one free alteration if the dress doesn't fit right the first time.

Shipping Standard is \$9.95; allow four weeks for delivery.

Return policy You can return unworn and unwashed dresses in standard sizes for a refund (not including shipping) within seven days. Mix-and-match-size dresses cannot be returned.

Shown: Amy style dress, \$299, plus tax and shipping.



Lighting Lightdesign.net

Click on "Access the LightDesign Studio" to start designing your own colorful handmade glass pendant lights, sconces, or other fixtures (\$93 to \$363). It was fun to pick out the light shape (there are 36 choices), base color (500 choices), and other options that add texture and color. One bummer: The spots on the sconce we ordered were a bit smaller than they looked in the picture online, so you might want to request a free color sample before ordering. Also, the fixture had a halogen bulb, which got red hot when our tester turned it on. So be sure to keep these lights away from draperies or anything else that can catch fire.

Shipping Standard is free; allow seven to 10 days.

Return policy In general, returns are accepted.

Shown: Glass sconce, \$213, plus shipping.



Knickknacks Simplysilhouettes.com

If you want to immortalize your family and pets with a custom silhouette portrait, e-mail photos of them (in profile) to this site, which will add the images to canvases, note cards, ornaments, jewelry, and other products (\$30 to \$400). One complaint: The ordering process was a bit annoying. You have to purchase your item via PayPal before you fill out the customization form. And the necklace we ordered had a ball chain, which was a bit cheesy. But it's the sentiment that counts, and it did look cute. **Shipping** Standard is \$8 for orders of \$25 to \$50; allow one month. **Return policy** No returns. But if the item has a manufacturing defect and you return it within 30 days, the company will fix it. *Shown: Necklace, \$65, plus shipping.*



Stationery plus Finestationery.com

This site has a huge selection of stationery and invitations, plus plates, paperweights, and gift wrap that can be personalized with a monogram, name, or photo. We ordered this cute kid's dinner plate, at right, for \$20. But a place mat for \$20 turned was just a big laminated card with unfinished edges.

Shipping Standard is \$7; time varies.

Return policy If you make an error (like a misspelling), the company will reprint the order at a discount.



Picture it

Lots of sites specialize in putting your favorite snapshots on everything from mugs to cards and calendars. Some surprises we found: You can now get your family photos plastered on coasters, puzzles, and even pillowcases. Check out all your options at sites like Shutterfly.com and Snapfish.com and at Walmart.com's Digital Photo Center. To order, select a product and upload a digital photo or choose one from an album you've already created on the site. Then you can preview the item you're designing before you complete the order. All three sites accept returns, and shipping costs vary depending on the item. We found that in general shipping takes only a few days.

We also tried a couple of sites that specialize in one type of customizable photo gift. Picpads.com, for example, specializes in notepads. They looked really cute on the site, but we weren't too thrilled when the slim pack of four notepads came in the mail and our bill, with shipping, was a whopping \$73. Snaptotes.com, on the other hand, which specializes in handbags, sent us the tote at left. It wasn't cheap at \$80, but it's well made and with the picture

of a staffer's baby it was unbelievably adorable. *Shown: Sesame Street Book from Shutterfly.com, \$39.99, plus tax and shipping; Snapfish.com talking card, \$5.99, plus shipping and tax.*



Tinyprints.com

Tinyprints.com sells stylish birth announcements, party invitations, holiday cards, and thank-you cards (\$1.15 to \$2.69 each). You choose the font types, sizes, and colors; some designs can incorporate photos. Click "bridal collection" to skip over to sister site Weddingpaperdivas.com for wedding invitations (starting at \$1.52 each). You can request a sample (\$3 to \$7) of some styles that comes with a coupon toward your order.

Shipping Varies; ground shipping for 25 to 50 cards is \$7. Shipping is free at Weddingpaperdivas.com; allow a week.

Return policy Returns are accepted within 45 days, minus fees, as long as the return isn't due to a mistake you made on the order form.

Shown: sample card by Weddingpaperdivas.com, \$19.

